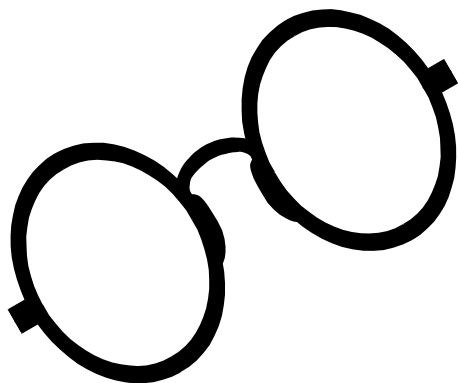


Facts for Consumers

Eye Wear



Federal Trade Commission
Bureau of Consumer Protection
Office of Consumer & Business Education
1-877-FTC-HELP www.ftc.gov

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Produced in cooperation with the American Academy of Ophthalmology, the National Association of Optometrists and Opticians, and the Opticians Association of America

If you, like many Americans, wear eye glasses or contact lenses, you probably know that comparison shopping can help you find quality eye wear that meets your budget. In fact, your ability to comparison shop for eyeglasses is aided by a Federal Trade Commission Regulation. Under federal law, you have a right to a copy of your eyeglass prescription so that you can shop for the best value in eye wear. If you are buying contact lenses, comparison shopping also can help you find an eye care specialist who offers products and services suited for you.

This fact sheet explains what rights you have under the law and gives you information about various types of eye care professionals. It also gives some suggestions about selecting an eye care specialist and shopping for eye exams, eyeglasses, and contact lenses.

Your Legal Rights

Eyeglasses

The Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) "Prescription Release Rule" requires eye doctors to give you your eyeglass prescription, at no extra cost, immediately after an eye exam that includes a refraction (a test that determines the prescription needed to correct your vision). Your eye doctor may withhold your eyeglass prescription until you have paid for your eye exam, but only if your eye doctor requires immediate payment whether or not a visual correction is needed.

With prescription in hand, you can shop for eyeglasses just as you would for other health-related products and services, looking for the best quality at the best price. You have a legal right to your eyeglass prescription, so request it if it is not provided immediately after an eye examination in which a refraction is performed.

Contact lenses

Although *not* required by federal law, many eye care specialists will give you a copy of your contact lens specifications. Some states require eye care specialists to give you a copy of your contact lens specifications. It is important to have a copy of these specifications if you want to buy your contact lenses, especially replacement or duplicate lenses, from a different specialist. Otherwise, you may have to pay for another lens fitting exam.

Selecting An Eye Care Specialist

Price is not your only consideration in choosing someone to examine your eyes, fill your prescription, or fit you for contact lenses. You also might be concerned about: the type of eye care specialist you wish to visit; the quality of eye care and eye wear you may receive; and the service that is promised, especially if some adjustments or modifications prove necessary.

Eye Professionals

Before selecting an eye care specialist, you should know the difference among the three

types of eye care specialists — ophthalmologists, optometrists, and opticians — and the services each is qualified to perform. Only ophthalmologists and optometrists may issue eyeglass and contact lens prescriptions.

Ophthalmologists are physicians who are either medical doctors (M.D.'s) or osteopathic physicians (D.O.'s). They specialize in diagnosing and treating diseases of the eyes. They can prescribe drugs, perform examinations and eye surgery, and dispense eyeglasses and contact lenses.

Optometrists have doctor of optometry degrees (O.D.'s). Though they are not medical doctors, they can examine eyes for vision problems and eye diseases and dispense eyeglasses and contact lenses. State law determines the extent to which optometrists may diagnose and treat eye diseases and prescribe drugs, and laws vary from state to state. In states where optometrists are not permitted to provide certain treatments, they will normally refer you to an ophthalmologist or other appropriate medical practitioner for such treatments.

Opticians fill prescriptions for eye wear written by ophthalmologists and optometrists. They may not examine eyes or prescribe lenses. They dispense eyeglasses and in some states are permitted to fit and dispense contact lenses. About half the states require opticians to be licensed.

Quality of Eye Care and Eye Wear

It may be difficult to predict the quality of the eye care, eye wear, and related services you will receive. Studies show that price and the type of practitioner are not necessarily indications of quality.

To help ensure quality care, you might ask for recommendations from your friends. You also might want to check with local consumer affairs offices and consumer organizations to see if any complaints have been lodged against the eye care specialist you are considering.

Services

Investigate what kind of service eye care providers will give you, especially if you have a problem. You may want to consider the following information.

Eye Exams: A thorough *eye examination* includes a refraction, tests for other vision conditions, and an eye health exam. An eye exam also can reveal whether you are a good candidate for contact lenses. Remember, only M.D.'s, D.O.'s and O.D.'s may perform eye exams.

Eyeglasses: If your eye exam shows you need a visual correction, you may decide you want eyeglasses. Ask about the delivery time for eyeglasses, any refund policy, and who pays for replacement lenses or frames if there are problems with either the lenses or the frames.

Contact Lenses: Contact lenses are important health care devices that require proper fitting and care. Thus, if you decide you want to buy contact lenses, additional steps are necessary beyond the basic eye exam — the contact lens evaluation and the *fitting*. They include measuring the curvature of your eye and determining which lens is best for you. The evaluation and fitting may be performed by ophthalmologists, optometrists, and, in some states, opticians.

Comparison Shopping For Contacts

Because buying contact lenses is more complicated than buying eyeglasses, here are some questions you might ask eye care specialists.

What do you charge for an eye exam, lenses, a contact lens evaluation, fittings, a lens care kit, follow-up visits, and “insurance” service agreements?

These items may be priced individually or sold as a package. Some advertisements for contact lenses quote bargain prices for the contact lenses alone. But bargain-priced contact lenses may not be the best purchase if the other essential goods and services are not included in the price.

If you are a first-time wearer of contact lenses, you will need services like fittings and follow-up visits in addition to lenses. Even experienced contact wearers may require several appointments before they get a proper fit.

So before you select an eye care specialist, ask about the total cost of care, including what tests are included in the eye exam. A reasonably-priced package may be a better deal than bargain-priced goods that do not include free follow-up visits.

What is your refund policy?

Not everyone who wants to wear contacts is able to adapt to them. With a good refund policy, you will not lose your entire investment if you cannot wear the contacts.

How many types and brands of contacts do you sell?

It may take several visits to find the right contact lenses for your eyes. If the specialist carries a large selection of contact lenses, it can increase your chances of getting a good fit.

How much do you charge for replacement lenses?

It is possible to lose or damage contact lenses. Find out how much you will be charged and how long you will have to wait if you need a replacement lens. Many providers offer service agreements, also known as "insurance" arrangements, that will cover the full or partial cost of replacing lost or damaged lenses. Find out whether such an agreement is available, what it covers, and how much it costs compared to the cost of replacement lenses.

What is your policy on the release of my contact lens specifications?

Under the FTC Rule, the eye care specialist must provide you with your eyeglass prescription, but not your contact lens specifications. Without these measurements, comparison shopping for contact lenses is difficult, if not impossible. Ask about the doctor's policy before you make an appointment for an eye exam. If you want a copy of your contact lens specifications, shop for an eye care provider who will release it to you.

For More Information

If you have questions about your rights under the FTC's Rule governing eyeglasses, write: Consumer Response Center, Federal Trade Commission, Washington, DC 20580. Although the FTC generally does not intervene in individual disputes, the information you provide helps in its law enforcement efforts.

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